THE

PATTERN

OF

CHRISTIAN PRUDENCE AND DISCRETION,

URGED AGAINST

HURTFUL AND FANTASTIC SCHEMES OF LIFE.

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PREFACE.

IT is evidently the deſign of all revealed religion ſo to diſcipline the mind, that its convictions ſhall ſupply the rules of life and practiſe. They who contend for ſpeculative theories, without ever deſigning to reduce them into uſe, or to frame their habits by them, abuſe the talent of reaſon, and are mere hypocrites in religion: they ſtudy the particulars of doctrine, not for their own ſatisfaction and advantage, nor for the benefit of others, but to prepare them for encounters; for occaſional diſplay, or for emulation and diſtinction. But moſt important is the ſearch and ſtudy of thoſe who ſeek to know by what rule they ſhall ſquare their lives, and faſhion their deportment, by what meaſures of duty or of prudence

dence they ſhall put forth the hand or reſtrain it: who enquire into the extent and limits of their lawful liberty, and weigh with candour the privileges or reſtrictions by which the whole of their intercourſe and converſe muſt be governed.

Let it not be imagined that the few following pages have been filled for the purpoſes of ſtrife, or of inconſiderate, unfeeling cenſure. The pattern there to be diſplayed, and the errors to be noted, are ſuch as affect the happineſs of men in a near and eminent degree. It is not neceſſary to add more in this place, than juſt to remark, that they who have attended to the ſteps which have been taken recently in this country, for the ſettlement of recluſe ſocieties, will not think the following Diſcourſe ill-timed. It is not deſigned to raiſe a prejudice againſt any, but it is intended for the purpoſe of fair and accurate diſcuſſion, and of ſeaſonable caution.

MATTHEW ix. 14.

THEN CAME TO HIM THE DISCIPLES OF JOHN, SAYING, WHY DO WE AND THE PHARISEES FAST OFT, BUT THY DISCIPLES FAST NOT?

THE garb and manners of many of the Prophets of Iſrael, were marked throughout their whole lives with deep tokens of affliction and auſterity. They were trained to hardſhips in ſolitary and ſequeſtered places, and prepared by a rigorous diſcipline to undertake the hardeſt enterprizes, or to encounter the ſevereſt ſufferings. Their commiſſions made this neceſſary. Jeremiah and Ezekiel gave ſtriking inſtances of this arduous appointment. When Ezekiel was choſen to denounce to the houſe of Iſrael the miſeries of a long ſiege and pinching famine, God enjoined him to ſet forth by tedious and painful ſufferings in his own perſon, the very circumſtances and

 particulars

particulars of thoſe days of ſorrow. The prophet was directed by the moſt afflicting courſe of life to bear the iniquity of the houſe of Iſrael. He was to be bound in bands; to eat a miſerable food by a ſcanty weight, and to drink water by meaſure, in order to repreſent to Iſrael the dreadful evils which impended at that time. The promiſes of ſpecial aids were often neceſſary to ſilence the complaints and to overcome the reluctance of thoſe whoſe commiſſions required ſuch ſtrong marks of woe, and impoſed ſo true a ſenſe of miſery. Thus ſtrengthened and encouraged, they were contented to exhibit in their lives and fortunes the very ſubſtance of calamity, and to become the monuments and emblems of ſevere and bitter things. But of all the prophets of Iſrael, the moſt eminent was the Holy Baptiſt. He ſtood upon the confines of both covenants, and was greater than the prophets of the old law, becauſe his foot had place within the limits of Chriſt's kingdom. He lived when the light had dawned, and therefore Chriſt ſaid he was more than a prophet. But neither his manners nor his character were wholly evangelical. The great diſpenſations of the new covenant wanted much of their confirmation and completion during his abode upon earth, and therefore Chriſt ſaid that the leaſt

leaſt in the kingdom of Heaven, of thoſe who were the meſſengers and miniſters of his accompliſhed revelations, was greater than he. His life was conſiſtent with his character, and anſwerable to his meſſage. He lived but in the twilight of the Goſpel, and repentance was his whole commiſſion. Accordingly his preaching was a cry: he choſe the deſart for his dwelling-place, and refuſed the cuſtomary uſe of worldly things. His office was to awaken the torpid minds of men, and therefore he was the pattern of all vigilance.

Such inſtances of uniform and unremitted rigour, in the witneſſes and ſervants of the Lord of old time, ſuch ſingular examples of auſterity, which were only proper upon ſome ſpecial accounts, and in conſiſtency with the nature of ſome peculiar diſpenſations of the divine will, were admired and extolled, even by thoſe who diſregarded the main objects to which their notice was invited. The ſingular diſplay of ſome one exerciſe of ſelf-denial, the practice of ſome extreme ſeverities which for particular ends were carried further than the general meaſures of good life or the varied duties of man in ſociety would otherwiſe have admitted, became the topics of applauſe and wonder.

We find that the Phariſees, falſe, ſuperſtitious, and hypocritical as they were, obtained great fame by ſuch means. They derived their reputation with the people from ſuch ſources.

From the words ſelected for diſcourſe we learn that the want of this admired auſterity, was objected to our Lord: and we may take occaſion, from this paſſage in his miniſtry, to expoſe the folly and ill conſequences of that pernicious miſconception of the nature of an holy life, which gave riſe to the queſtion in the text. We may then paſs on to weigh the reaſons which induced our Saviour to exhibit in his own example, the various pattern of a life in which the great end of moral and religious excellence was ſhewn to be diſtinct from ſuch auſterities, and incompatible with a blind devotion to them. The proſecution of this argument will prove beyond diſpute that although our bleſſed Lord neither declined entirely the ſeaſonable uſe of ſuch ſeverities as the prophets exerciſed, and in which the Phariſees placed their chief pretenſions, yet he intimated plainly that habits of perpetual reſtraint and rigour were not to conſtitute the mode of life deſigned for his diſciples. They had a ſuperior character to ſuſtain, and enjoyed a

better

better privilege than any of the Prophets of the houſe of Iſrael.

Our bleſſed Lord exhibited to mankind the model and pattern of an univerſal righteouſneſs. He adopted in his own deportment, and commended to his faithful ſervants, that wide and ample ſcheme of duty by which the utmoſt improvement of the ſpiritual nature was to be fulfilled. We have in his life and perſon, ſufficient veſtiges of almoſt every kind of intereſt of which the human heart is capable. We behold in him the plain effect of many of thoſe bonds of duty and affection, which have place in the firſt and neareſt circles of ſocial life, although ſuperior calls were often vindicated and exalted over thoſe ties. In all things he diſplayed the clear pre-eminence of a various pattern, over any one reſtrictive meaſure of religious exerciſe. In vain then did the Jews, who had formed to themſelves falſe notions of religious excellence, expect to find in him the peculiar and unremitted practice of auſterity. In vain did the Phariſees and diſciples of John demand ſuch tokens of his zeal, and require ſuch proofs of his ſanctity. They were ſcarcely leſs miſtaken than many who hoped to celebrate perpetual banquets with

him,

him, and to have their bread perpetually multiplied. Our Lord was not to exemplify ſome one grace, or character of righteouſneſs, nor to ſet the pattern of ſome ſolitary virtue. He was to be moderate in all things. No one exerciſe of piety was to form the ſingle feature in his life.

But let us proceed to ſhew diſtinctly the falſe motives of their preference, who in any age or country have departed from this pattern, regarding only what is ſingular and beyond the ordinary pitch of nature, but neglecting the varied and juſt tenor of a prudent courſe, in which the ſpirit of religion operates with a lively freedom. This miſtaken preference did not ceaſe with the Phariſee. In ſucceeding ages of the world many fell into the ſame groſs error.

Far be it from us to reproach thoſe who in early times were eminent for a rigorous and ſevere diſdain of the manners and the cuſtoms of the pagan world; who ſickened at the monſtrous luxuries of that vicious capital, where all crimes abounded, where guilty pleaſures were linked with groſs idolatries, and where the names and limits of true

virtue

virtue were utterly confounded. If they put on a more near reſemblance to the prophets of Iſrael in old times, it was becauſe they alſo lived under the ſevereſt diſpenſations of time and trial. They were driven into deſarts by the rage of perſecution, or compelled to renounce the common circles of ſociety by the horror which the heathen follies and enormities excited. Many leſs commendable inſtances of ſingular auſterity exiſted among Chriſtians, even in the earlieſt ages: but they were juſtly marked with ſeaſonable cenſures. We find ſome in the firſt times who reſolved the whole of Chriſtianity into the perpetual exerciſe of prayer. Others made religion to conſiſt in ſo ſtrange and extreme an abſtinence, that without violating their own rules, which they refuſed to do, they could not participate in the holy communion; and thus ſtood condemned by the very ordinance of Chriſt. Some in divers ages have ſought to concentrate the whole eſſence of religion in abſtractions, not only from the world, but even from the body; in unions and abſorptions, which were calculated to leave nothing of the man in this world, the proper ſcene of his duty, but the mere ſign. Theſe errors were condemned as ſoon as they appeared. The voice of the world will, indeed, be frequently in favour of what is thus extravagant.

travagant. It is more eaſy to win admiration by ſuch practices than to withdraw men from their vices, or to train them to an uniform performance of the duties of their ſtation. To this day there are not wanting numbers who prefer the pattern of the prophets of Iſrael, and of the Holy Baptiſt, to that which our Redeemer ſet forth in his own courſe, and recommended to his followers. They plead example from the firſt profeſſors of monaſtic life, whoſe misplaced zeal unhappily obtained too large a ſhare of favour in the world, however near in its approach to thoſe groſſer violations of the Chriſtian rule which were formally condemned. When we behold men who profeſs the faith in Chriſtian ſtates, clothing themſelves in fantaſtic and uneaſy habits, conſuming the beſt years of their lives in ſolitude, abſtaining from the common uſe of preſent things, declining ſocial intercourſe, and abjuring all the ties and intereſts of human life, can we deny that they prefer the pattern of the prophets of Iſrael, pierced and affrighted as they were with grievous tidings and calamitous commiſſions, to the general ſcheme of various duty and reaſonable ſervice, which our Lord fulfilled? It is evident by this preference, founded in the ſame ſpirit of error which ſpeaks in the text, that the

moderate

moderate and equal plan of univerſal goodneſs is rejected; the performance of every thing fitting and becoming in its ſeaſon is abandoned, and the practical and natural portrait of a mode of life, deſigned and exhibited for our imitation, is entirely diſregarded. This is an error which affects the whole character of man, which defeats many of the righteous purpoſes of his converſion, and diſfigures the whole form of a reaſonable ſervice. It deſtroys much of the intended influence of that ſcheme of grace, which even in this ſcene was deſigned to make good ſome meaſures of man's reſtoration to happineſs and freedom. We may therefore do well to examine carefully the ground upon which this falſe eſtimate is built, and to weigh the pleas by which it is defended.

The chief pleas for that ſcheme of life, which ſome have called by way of eminence religious, but of which we have no trace in the evangelical rule, may be reduced to two heads. The exerciſe of repentance; and the high aim at perfection.

Let us treat theſe in their order.

In contemplating the ſeveral characters of repentance in its different ſtages, it will readily appear that the rigours of a voluntary miſery extended through the whole of life, are utterly inconſiſtent with the leſſons of repentance which the Goſpel teaches. Repentance forms indeed a ſolid and perpetual part of the condition of the Chriſtian life. But it is eaſy to perceive that its exerciſes and expreſſions muſt vary in proportion to the ſeveral advances which are made in that courſe which leads to happineſs. Its prime convictions and early teſtimonies muſt carry deep marks of concern, more eſpecially after long habits of tranſgreſſion, or where groſs departures have been made from the firſt engagement of the Chriſtian vow. The light of truth, by diſcovering to every man his real ſtate, muſt impreſs the mind with many ſad convictions, and cannot fail to awaken in the boſom many keen and ſorrowful reflections. The full ſenſe of the guilt and hatefulneſs of ſin, muſt fill the early meaſures of repentance with abundance of concern and grief, with much abaſement and humiliation, with great bitterneſs of ſpirit, and with ſevere compunction. But nothing is more manifeſt in all the Scriptures, than that this prime and abject ſtage of anguiſh and remorſe has the promiſe of alleviation, and of preſent

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ſuccour and redreſs. The Prophet of the Lord, of old time, held out this encouragement to the penitent, that his ſins, however deep in dye, ſhould become white as wool; that there ſhould be neither memory nor mention of them any more. Who can doubt whether the completion of this gracious promiſe be not made good under the new covenant, confirmed by its ſacred ſeals, and ratified by its conſolatory pledges? The meek and merciful Redeemer, profeſſed that he came to bind up the bruiſed reed, and to relieve the heavy laden. The Goſpel univerſally ſpeaks peace to the penitent, and enſures him a glad reception to his father's family. Accordingly the ſorrowful abaſement and contrition, which accompany a true ſenſe of guilt, and which caſt the penitent to the earth, are followed by the gift of pardon, and crowned by favour and advancement. To thoſe who were converted by the word of Chriſt during his miniſtry, or by the paſtoral labours of his Apoſtles and firſt witneſſes, there was indeed the frequent mention of paſt ſins, but the remembrance was renewed either upon the ſcore of gratitude for ſo great deliverance, or it was revived upon the ground of further heedfulneſs and caution. But we have before acknowledged that repentance conſtitutes a main part of the condition of Chriſtianity, and muſt

endure throughout the whole courſe of our trial. Nor do we now deny this. The common imperfections which attach to thoſe, whoſe failures only ceaſe when the term of human weakneſs is concluded, require perpetual acknowledgments, and can never be regarded without ſorrow. Repentance therefore becomes an inſeparable feature in the Chriſtian character. But theſe meaſures of an humble penitence, which are ſuited to the common imperfections, and proper to the frequent failures which take place amidſt good intentions, differ widely from that firſt ſhame and affliction, that grief and humiliation, which, together with fear, are caſt out from the boſom by the growth of Chriſtian habits. Well then may we conclude upon this head, that he who humbleth himſelf before God, will be lifted up; that he will not be condemned to perpetual ſorrow and ſecluſion in this life, but returned into ſociety, to let his light ſhine for the benefit of others, to practiſe all the offices, and to fulfil the various exerciſes of an univerſal righteouſneſs. The firſt plea, therefore, for perpetual penance and ſeverities, for the garb and habits of mere penitence in lieu of the juſt expreſſions of a Chriſtian ſpirit, is found inſufficient.

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Let us now paſs on to the due conſideration of that which forms a ſtill more favourite pretence for romantic and ſtrange modes of life; let us regard the lofty aim at eminent perfection.

The main ground of thoſe falſe meaſures of perfection, which have been the fruitful ſources of ſuperſtition and extravagance, may be recognized in that perplexed opinion which puts a difference between the Goſpel rules; ſuppoſing ſome things to be commanded as indiſpenſable and needful, whilſt others are barely counſelled, as points of voluntary zeal. In this fallacious eſtimate, the ſum of neceſſary duty is confined to the firſt rank, whilſt ſublime and arduous attainments are referred to the latter claſs. This notion, therefore, involves the dangerous poſition, that it is poſſible to exceed the line of duty. The whole nature of the moral law oppoſes this conceit. The words of Chriſt reclaim againſt it. Who can even imagine an addition to that full deſcription of the moral law, by which it is declared to bind univerſally to all that we can do; ſetting forth our obligation to love the Lord our God, with all the heart, and with all the ſoul, and with all the ſtrength; and our neighbour as ourſelves. A rule entirely perfect, and

not

not to be tranſcended by a voluntary zeal. This error, the prolific parent of ſingularity and exceſs, is not, however, without ſome plauſible pretexts. The Apoſtle has, in ſome remarkable caſes, expreſſed himſelf in terms of commendation, concerning ſome ſacrifices made to the intereſts of Religion, which were purely voluntary. He has extended this commendation, as our Lord ſeems alſo to have done in one of his diſcourſes, to the caſe of celibacy, without impoſing an injunction upon any. It is clear then, that ſome things, which do not make neceſſary parts of duty, are deciſively commended. But theſe inſtances, ſo far from conſtituting points above the common level of our duty, were but the peculiar means which might or might not be employed in order to fulfil it. They are not commanded, becauſe nothing is commanded but the general condition of univerſal righteouſneſs, of which they make no neceſſary part. They are recommended, becauſe in ſome caſes, ſuch as thoſe which obtained in the times of the Apoſtles, they might ſerve to the main end of obedience, and then their difficulty would contribute alſo to enhance their value, as exalted inſtances of faith. But it is contended, that in the ſcope and extent of the divine law, there are degrees of excellence. There are ſuch, without doubt. But they are

proportioned,

proportioned, not to the ſeveral heads of things commanded and things counſelled, nor to the mere choice and fancy of mankind, but as Scriptures teach, to the occaſions, gifts, abilities, and opportunities of men. Our ſervices of faith and zeal are capable of augmentation and enlargement, with our knowledge and our powers, or with the juſt calls and ſpecial claims which may attach to us; they are weighed always, with a due reſpect to what each man receives, and with a merciful allowance for many points of failure. If the ſame ſpecific acts of ſervice, in every point and particular, were required from all, the weak might be broken and diſcouraged; whilſt the zealous and the ardent might be retarded in their courſe. But the ſame end is propoſed to all. The rule of duty is alſo uniform and perfect, incapable of augmentation or addition. The means, indeed, are various; they may be more or leſs fit, or they may loſe their fitneſs altogether. This could not be the caſe with any ſolid and perpetual part of duty. The very reaſon why ſuch things were not preſcribed, far from proving their ſuperior excellence and high perfection, conſiſts in this, that they may vary even in their propriety and expedience, or they may become abſolutely hurtful. Thus this main plea for over-weening efforts and forced modes of life, as they are

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thought to conſtitute an higher ſtep in the great ſcale of advancement, proves deficient. It is obvious to remark, that where the means by which we may, in ſome caſes, advance in our attainment of the great end of moral and religious improvement are erected into the higheſt rank of excellence, and make the ſtandard of perfection, the whole work of Religion will not fail to be perverted.

We have now examined the two chief pretences for thoſe ſingular attempts, by which the Chriſtian character has been ſo frequently diſtorted, by which the maxims of ſincere and ſober piety, the intereſts of mankind, the general welfare of the whole body of believers, the honor of God, and the credit of the Goſpel, have been greatly injured. It would be eaſy to ſhew, by a wider ſcope of argument, that true excellence conſiſts in that well adjuſted harmony which combines the ſeveral branches of a various duty. It is the known definition of all virtue, to keep the mean; not only becauſe exceſſes of all kinds are miſchievous, but becauſe one virtue ought not to occupy the place which is deſigned for many. If it be the difficulty which is thought ſo greatly to enhance the value of romantic ſchemes of life and ſingular auſterities, let it be conſidered, whether the experience of all times does not prove, that it is more congenial

genial to the heart of man, to engage in deſperate and ſtrange attempts, and to renounce, by ſome ſudden effort, what others hold dear, than to determine with exactneſs and diſcretion in the uſe of things, to oppoſe with judgment their encroachments, and to reſcind this or that cuſtomary indulgence when it becomes importunate, and when it verges to exceſs. How many will be ready to expoſe their lives, or to pledge themſelves to ſome romantic undertaking, where praiſe and applauſe will follow them, who cannot endure the uniform and humble courſe of ordinary labour. Where the pride of man is not ſoothed, nor his name diſtinguiſhed, wearineſs and diſcontent are too apt to damp the zeal of good deſigns, and to retard the ſteps of ſilent perſeverance.

If, indeed, the palm of religious excellence were to be diſputed on the ſcore of voluntary ſufferings, there would be many candidates from among the Heathen, whoſe extravagant exceſſes in this way would bid fair for preeminence. But the practice frequently defeats the purpoſe. It is a known truth, that the force of cuſtom will conciliate any mode of life which can be borne. Thus the moſt uncouth ſeverities are ſoon aſſimilated to the habit, if they do not undermine the whole ſtrength of the body, and

produce deplorable infirmities, and untimely death. It deſerves well to be conſidered, how frequently theſe ſad effects may have ſucceeded to unnatural and prepoſterous ſchemes of life. In a word, ſuch rigours are every way unreaſonable, ſubverſive of all Chriſtian freedom, frequently pernicious in their whole effect, certainly deſtructive of the exerciſe of many virtues. They may be even ſimply unlawful; as the performance of them may divert the courſe from many taſks of ordinary duty, and as the vow by which deluded perſons may bind themſelves to terms exceeding their ability, may prove a fatal ſnare. Where ſhall we find in the romantic ſchemes of ſingular auſterity, in ſuch practices as were unjudiciouſly admired by thoſe who brought the queſtion in the text to our Redeemer; where ſhall we diſcover in thoſe rules, the fair image of a juſt and reaſonable temperance, which is neither the leaſt becoming, nor the leaſt difficult part of duty, and which our Lord ſet forth in his example? Where ſhall we find the grateful ſervices of a thankful heart, abounding in the ſenſe of preſent benefits, and abounding towards God?

I have dwelt the longer on theſe topics, becauſe the miſtaken practice which has been built upon ſome parts of the regimen of faith, perverted to exceſs, or upon plain

errors

errors in opinion, is rendered ſo alluring by the colours of diſintereſted zeal, and by the venerable air of deep devotion. The fair and ſpecious character of a piety, which aims at exaltations far above the common rules of life, whoſe romantic rigours ſcarcely leave any room at all for the ordinary functions and diſcharge of moral duty, may prove fatally deluſive. The noble ſemblance may deceive, and moſt bitter and ſevere will be the fruits of that deception. Miſtakes on theſe heads have very ſad conſequences; more eſpecially becauſe the well-diſpoſed, the docile and the tractable, they whoſe hearts are moſt ſuſceptible of lively impulſes and permanent impreſſions, will be the moſt expoſed to injury by the application of exaggerated maxims, operating to their own hurt, and to the damage of ſociety.

It is the diſtinguiſhing character of ſuperſtition to inſiſt upon one thing, to ſee truth through a medium which enlarges its dimenſions. But "a wiſe man's heart diſcerneth time and judgment." It is that diſcernment and diſcretion, guided by a due regard to public order and to actual benefit, which muſt keep good deſigns from raſhneſs and precipitation, and more eſpecially in the uſe of thoſe means of diſcipline which are ſubject to the rules of prudence and advantage.

Finally,

Finally, let us obſerve with one mind, the great duty of conformity to the bright pattern of our Lord's life. It was a work moſt ſurely worthy of Divine wiſdom, worthy of him in whom the treaſures of wiſdom were concentred, to preſcribe to the moral agent ſuch principles as might determine the particulars of duty. It was a work no leſs proper and becoming for the ſame Divine Inſtructor, to illuſtrate and exemplify his own precepts. It is to that ſtandard then, to that pattern and example, that we muſt direct our heedful notice. It will enable us to detect the fallacy of other ſchemes of life, invented according to the ſingular conceit or partial humour of ſome who have preſumptuouſly ſought to frame a model of their own, in preference to that various draught of duty. To Him, therefore, who is juſtly ſtyled the Way, the Truth, and the Life, let us commit ourſelves; taking him for our guide; and his life, as far it was deſigned for imitation, for our pattern. To Him, with the Father, and the Holy Ghoſt, be glory, and honour, and praiſe, and thankſgiving, now and for evermore.

THE END.

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The Vice Chancellor
from the Author